

Back to the Future: Nineteenth Century Foundations of Messianic Judaism

Matt Friedman
Asbury Theological Seminary

A youth named Lederer was converted in Budapest. Glowing with fresh enthusiasm, he went to New York. There he met a young, able, and accomplished student, Schereschewszky by name, and led him to Christ. Schereschewszky went to China, acquired the language, and translated for the first time the Old Testament into Chinese, direct from the original Hebrew, of which he was absolute master. His translation is the standard Chinese version to-day – the instrument used by every missionary in the land. By the blessing of God the conversion of a Jewish youth in Budapest was the means of giving the Bible to the vast Empire of China. This one fact surely sheds a vivid light upon that word of the great Jewish Christian missionary "If the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead?" (Rev. William Ewing, in World Missionary Conference 1910, 416-417)

The gathering of missionaries and scholars in Edinburgh in 1910 for the World Missionary Conference was one of the pivotal moments in the history of Christian mission; indeed, in the history of the Church itself. For just over a week in June, delegates from throughout the Christian world discussed and debated, assessing the previous "Great Century" of mission (to use Kenneth Scott Latourette's phrase) as well as charting the course forward. Often overlooked amid the great swath of missional territory surveyed has been mission in the Jewish context. This brief paper will consider the lives of two representative figures from the nineteenth as well as in the subsequent century, before concluding with some brief remarks regarding mission in the Jewish context in the twentieth century

After centuries of mostly hostility and neglect by the Christian community, a fresh hope for witness to the Jews was to dawn with the nineteenth century, over the course of which about 205,000 Jewish

people (Ruppen 1913, 183-184¹) would profess faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. This movement featured a colorful cast of characters, two of whom we will briefly examine here: Joseph Samuel Frey and Joseph Rabinowitz. The lives of these two individuals serve as “bookends” to the century chronologically, and, in a way, serve to contrast two perspectives on mission in the Jewish context: what Arnold Fructenbaum refers to as a policy of “assimilation” as opposed to a policy of “distinction” (Fructenbaum 1974, 48), or to paraphrase Jacob Jocz, the difference between “Jewish converts to Christianity” and “Messianic Jews” (Jocz 1962, 233). Of course, all of this should be understood in the context of the issues of identity and assimilation which were important from the beginning of the eighteenth century.²

Joseph Samuel Frey is sometimes called the “Father of Modern Jewish Missions” (Meyer 1983, 113). According to his autobiographical account (Frey 1841), he was born in Germany in 1771 to a fairly devout Jewish family. His maternal uncle had embraced the faith in Jesus, as a result of which Frey’s mother had become embittered against Christianity. Frey notes that as a family they studied literature which was designed to refute Christian teaching as a means of being fortified against the Christian faith. He learned to read Hebrew from a very young age, and by the time he was six years old, he could read the Torah and was soon studying the commentaries as well as Talmud and other traditional writings in preparation for a career as a Jewish religious leader. As his studies continued, he was successively ordained as a *chazan* (cantor), as a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and finally as a rabbi. It is interesting that while Frey's autobiographical account unfortunately does not convey a very positive view of his Jewish upbringing, his narrative nonetheless includes an anecdote of his own father's prayers reviving his sister from what had appeared to be death (Frey 1841, 1-14).

¹ Citing baptismal statistics compiled by De La Roi

² The late eighteenth century onwards saw the rise of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment (Kinzer 2005, 269-270).

Frey's journey to faith in Messiah came about after a series of circumstances. Having received some misinformation about some possible employment in another town, he was impacted en route by a discussion in the stage coach in which he was traveling between a man who was a sincere Christian and a non-observant Jew. He ended up traveling to Rostock, the town in which the Christian lived, in order to find him. To his dismay, he discovered that Jewish people were not allowed to stay overnight in this town. Having been intrigued, however, by the conversation in the coach, Frey declared himself an inquirer into the Gospel. He was subsequently shuttled around by Christians who were suspicious of his motives. In spite of this, he became convinced of the truth of the Gospel and was baptized by a Lutheran pastor (Frey 1841, 15-21). It would, nonetheless, be some time before he entered into what he considered a living faith in Jesus, after coming into further contact with more devout Christians in another town (Meyer 1983, 116).

It was following this that Frey concluded that he should prepare for full-time ministry, and entered a missionary college (Meyer 1983, 116). Finding a place and group with which to serve was difficult; the Danish Missionary Society, for example, asked the college for potential candidates, but specifically rejected Frey, because he was Jewish (Frey 1841, 42). Later, an opportunity arose for him to go with two other colleagues to Africa via England. They faced discouraging delays, but it was there that he felt guided by the Lord to remain in England and serve there among his own people (Frey 1841, 49).

Initially working with the London Missionary Society, it was following difficulties with them that he left in 1809 to join and help establish what would then become known as the “London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews”, or the “London Jews' Society” (Thompson 1902, 94). He

worked with this group in London for the next six years, engaged in evangelism and helping the poor. They acquired the use of a chapel for what was mainly a “preaching point” in a largely Jewish area, with evangelistic messages by Frey and “ministers of the various denominations.” The goal at that point was extraction, rather than the establishment of a community of Jewish believers (Gidney 1908, 39). This was not an easy ministry; often viewed as apostates and traitors, Frey and those who inquired at the chapel sometimes faced physical threats and intimidation (Endelman 1999, 286). When the society was brought under the Church of England in 1815 for financial reasons, it was no longer possible for Frey to remain working under their auspices due to denominational restrictions.³ It was at this time that he left to work among the Jews in America (Frey 1841, 72).

In America, Frey initially worked under a small mission to the Jewish community in New York shortly after his arrival. It wasn't long afterwards, however, that he received a letter from one D. Marc, who was working among the impoverished Jews in parts of Europe. Marc urged Frey to establish a colony for these Christian Jews to which they could come in the United States (Minutes 1903, 18-19). This eventually led to the initiation of another new society, the “American Society for the Meliorating the Condition of the Jews” (A.S.M.C.J.). Their goals included resettling these European Jewish believers in Jesus as well as contributing to the evangelization of the Jewish community in the United States, which was still fairly small. They also published a paper called *Israel's Advocate*. The work was not without opposition, with a periodical called *The Jew* published in polemic response to *Israel's Advocate* by one Solomon Jackson (Jackson 1823). Nonetheless, a farm was rented and outfitted for the immigrants, and a small society began to meet together as these Jewish believers from Europe trickled in (Minutes... 1903, 20-21). Within a few years, however, the farm had collapsed financially and had to

³ It is worth noting, however, that even many years later, Frey expressed satisfaction that the society which he had established (“my *child*,” he wrote) had continued in the work among in the Jewish community (Frey 1841, 71).

be sold off (Shpall 1950, 121).

Eventually, Frey withdrew from a primary focus on Jewish mission, and for the last several years of his life, he served as the pastor of several Baptist churches in New York and Michigan. He continued, however, to write about his life and about subjects which were related to mission among the Jews until his death in 1850. Meyer notes that, “God honored him exceedingly by making him the father of Christian work among the Jews on both sides of the Atlantic” (Meyer 1983, 119). To be sure, Frey was a pioneer in that he was genuinely advocating and involved with focused mission to the Jews, both in England and in America. It bears repeating, however, that the essential goal was more to see Jews become assimilated Christians rather than bringing into being a community of Jewish believers. This remained the usual pattern throughout the nineteenth century. It was towards the end of the century that another model began to emerge, an example of which is found in the life and work of Joseph Rabinowitz.

Joseph Rabinowitz was born in 1837 in what is now Moldova. Following his mother’s death, he was sent to be raised by his maternal grandparents, who were devout Hasidic Jews, and at an early age he had committed to memory a significant amount of Jewish religious teaching (Meyer 1983, 89). It was at this time that he acquired a Hebrew New Testament from a Jewish acquaintance, who remarked that “possibly Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah” (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 18). Married at eighteen, he became involved in Jewish community life, practicing law, lecturing for reform, contributing to Jewish newspapers, and seeking the welfare of the large Jewish community of the city of Kishinev⁴ (now Chişinău), which had suffered antisemitic violence (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 18).

4 World Missionary Conference 1910, 269, n. 1, notes that half of the population of Kishenev was Jewish at that time.

In response to this wave of persecution, Rabinowitz made a visit to Palestine in 1882 to investigate the possibility of finding a location in which he could establish a Jewish settlement (Meyer 1983, 92).

Discouraged by the condition of the Jewish community which he observed in Jerusalem, he climbed the Mount of Olives and, in view of the Dome of the Rock standing in the place where once stood Solomon's Temple, he sought to understand the cause of Jewish suffering throughout history (Schonfield 1936, 224). The words came to his mind from the New Testament he had read, and which he had carried with him to Palestine: "Without me you can do nothing;" it was then that he concluded that Jesus of Nazareth truly *was* the Messiah, and that the restoration of his people could come only through him. "The key to the Holy Land," it came to his mind, "is in the hands of our brother Jesus" (Meyer 1983, 92).

Once back in Kishinev, he began to share his beliefs with the general population, working towards the emergence of a congregation of Jewish believers in Jesus who would worship *as Jews*. Rabinowitz named the congregation *Beney Israel, Beney Brit Chadashah* ("the People of Israel; the People of the New Covenant")(Kinzer 2005, 274), and they continued practicing traditions such as Shabbat observance and circumcision. They worshipped in Hebrew with preaching in the Jewish-German vernacular of Yiddish (Schonfield 1936, 225). Although the pastor of a Lutheran congregation in Kishinev, Rudolf Faltin, had hoped to baptize Rabinowitz into the Lutheran Church (Kjær-Hansen 1995, 79), Rabinowitz ultimately decided to travel to Berlin for a baptism ceremony which included ministers from a number of traditions; this would thus leave him free, not fully identified with any of them (Kinzer 2005, 274). Although some Christian leaders still had questions regarding Rabinowitz's desire to encourage Jewish believers to maintain their Jewish identity and customs, generally there was

a willingness to accept Rabinowitz's stance as at least a temporary measure (Kinzer 2005, 274-275).

While Rabinowitz helped bring many Jews to faith in Jesus (Meyer 1983, 93-94), he was unable to baptize many of them as he was never able to receive the required legal permission to do so from the Russian authorities. When Rabinowitz died in 1899, he left no successor, and the congregation was quickly scattered. This may have been partly due to a devastating pogrom which broke out against the Jewish community of Kishinev in 1903 (Kjær-Hansen 1995, 204-205).

Although the long-term results from Rabinowitz's work are difficult to calculate, his was one of several truly pioneering efforts at the end of the nineteenth century to birth a movement of Jewish believers in Jesus which would be genuinely indigenous in theology, practice and identity. Such movements sometimes faced opposition from Christian leaders who were concerned that they were going over into “legalism” or in danger of starting a “sect” (e.g., see Heman 1910, 181)⁵. Rabinowitz himself was accused by Faltin of “Ebionitism” (though curiously, Faltin nonetheless praised his effective evangelistic preaching!) (Kjær-Hansen 1995, 142). Others suggested that Hebrew Christians were violating the principle of being “one in Christ” (Schonfield 1936, 210) and were “giving rise to increased cleavage within the Church” (Sobel 1975, 311). Perhaps most ironic in the late nineteenth

5 Heman is worth quoting at length on this. This was published in English translation in 1910, the same year as the World Missionary Conference, and based on the original German article by the author published in the *Realencyklopeie* in 1903. The English article was republished verbatim in 1950. “The proper persons to be employed in converting the Jews are Christian clergymen; although it is much more difficult to prepare born Christians for work of that kind than born Jews, who can more easily adapt themselves to the mode of thinking of their brethren. But it would be entirely wrong to gather the Jews into a separate Judæo-Christian Church, since that would lead only to a new sect; and, on the other hand, extreme caution must be observed that baptism may not be granted too hastily or to unworthy recipients. Methods of missionary work differ according to the various conditions of the Jews. While the Jews lived almost without any legal rights among the Christians the State and the Church could force them to hear the preaching of the Gospel in their own synagogues or in churches. Since the emancipation of the Jews, this method has become impossible, and they have accordingly been visited in their homes, and the Gospel has been announced to them by the distribution of tracts and books.” (Heman 1910, 181)

and early twentieth centuries was one group insisting that the formation of congregations of Jewish believers was somehow going against the grain of “dispensational truth” (Schonfield 1936, 220).

Such opposition notwithstanding, it can truly be said that Rabinowitz and others like him in his era helped pave the way for the emerging Messianic Judaism which continues to grow to this day. At the beginning of the nineteenth century we observed the initial step of a ministry focused on mission to the Jewish population, under Joseph Samuel Frey and those working with him. From this work developed the emergence of the first Hebrew-Christian fellowships by the middle of the nineteenth century, though without much which would be considered culturally or religiously Jewish (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 16-17). By the end of the century we can see the first steps towards the re-emergence of an indigenous Messianic Jewish community, though it would still be much later before this would come more fully into fruition.

Where did the movement go from there? Particularly in Europe, the influx of thousands of Jews continued from where it had left off in the nineteenth century. It has been estimated that more than 200,000 Jewish people in Europe came to faith in Jesus in the years between the first and second world wars (Glaser 1998, 69). This movement, like so much else of beauty in the Jewish world, was swept away by the tide of death that was the Holocaust. Misconceptions aside, faith in Jesus offered no protection against those who sought to kill Jewish people regardless of their beliefs; most of the Jewish believers in Jesus in Europe perished among the millions of other Jewish people (Gefen 2008, 101; see also Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 42-43). Following the Holocaust, many Jewish missions ceased to function, especially in areas where the Jewish population had been decimated, and many of the churches which had earlier supported evangelism in the Jewish community began to focus entirely on Christian-Jewish.

Over the course of the next several decades, especially in the United States, a slow trickle of Jewish people continued to come to faith in Jesus. It was the “Jesus Movement” of the late 1960's and 1970's which would revive the fortunes of ministry among the Jews in a number of directions. This period saw thousands of Jewish young people once again embracing faith in Jesus. Many of them flocked into the churches, continuing the general process of assimilation with the surrounding culture which had already been taking place in the Jewish community. Others sought to develop a more authentically Jewish expression of faith in Jesus, and this led further in the direction of a Messianic Judaism along the lines envisioned and practiced by Joseph Rabinowitz many decades earlier. This led to the development of an increasingly robust congregational movement (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 65).

Now, in the early twenty-first century, and in the midst of the centenary celebration and renewal of the World Missionary Conference, let us look at how mission in the Jewish context is progressing on three levels: mission *to* the Jewish community, mission *within* the Jewish community, and finally, mission *from* the community of Jewish believers in Jesus to the nations beyond, participating in the worldwide *missio Dei*.

While there is an increasing focus on Jewish authenticity of the sort exemplified by Joseph Rabinowitz, it is important to remember that the role of the Gentile church in mission *to* the Jewish community remains crucial; indeed, as Susan Perlman has pointed out, “the majority of Jews coming to Christ today are still coming to know the Messiah as a result of the witness of Gentile Christians” (Perlman 2000, 79). It cannot be overestimated how crucial mission to the Jewish people is through the wider body of Christ in word, deed and life example. Indeed, the original report from Edinburgh 1910 had

noted how the work of Jewish missions in aiding those in need had helped in reducing prejudice against the Gospel in that age (World Missionary Conference 1910, 276). It needs to be understood that Jewish society continues to see changes which are as dynamic as is the case within broader societies especially in the West. Thus, we must not fall into the fallacy of attempting to use the same strategy for all Jewish people everywhere. The Jewish community is not monolithic, and strategies must be prayerfully developed for mission in all segments of the Jewish community (Perlman 2000, 77).

At the same time, the importance of mission *within* the Jewish community has grown as a number of different streams of Messianic Jewish congregational life have emerged. These streams vary considerably in terms of the degree of Jewish ritual and lifestyle practiced in services as well as in the personal lives of the members. There is an awareness, however, of the need for authenticity and for an identity which will be understandable to, if not always necessarily accepted by, the broader Jewish community. Stuart Dauermann, in an adaptation of a similar illustration by the Indian Christian figure Sadhu Sundar Singh, offers the “Yahrzeit Glass Principle”: a yahrzeit candle is a candle in a small glass which one burns as a memorial on the anniversary of the death of an immediate relative. The glasses are often saved and used in serving drinks, often tea. To be served tea in a yahrzeit glass, Dauermann observes, demonstrates that “at least someone in that home honors Jewish traditions” and that one is being “treated like a member of the family” (Spielberg and Dauermann 1997, 23). Even as tea served in such a glass is more easily received, so the Gospel ought to be presented in a manner consistent with indigenous traditions insofar as this is possible without compromising the Gospel itself. Interestingly, one rather fascinating corollary to the deepening level of identification of some Messianic Jews with the Jewish tradition has been a slowly growing, albeit still fairly marginal, degree of acceptance by some of Messianic Judaism as a valid form of Judaism (see for example Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 210-213);

indeed, in one startling account, Israeli writer Gavriel Gefen describes hearing one unnamed Jewish scholar who is not an adherent to Messianic Judaism suggesting publicly that faith in Jesus as the Messiah may in the near future no longer be considered a “boundary issue” for inclusion within or exclusion from the Jewish community (Gefen 2008, 108).

Forums for developing (and indeed, arguing about) an indigenous Messianic Jewish theology have emerged, such as the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism and the Hashivenu forum (Gefen 2008, 102). These have had their share of controversies, but representatives of several of the streams of Messianic Jewish theological and missiological thought have come together to present papers and discuss key issues in a search for greater depth as well as unity.⁶ All of these streams have had their place, deepening the mission of discipleship and witness in the Jewish community.

Finally, there is the developing dimension of mission *from* the Jewish community to the nations. This is where we began this paper, with the quote from the documents of the original 1910 World Missionary Conference. On the one hand, as long as there have been Jewish followers of Jesus, there have been those such as Schereschewszky who have felt a call on their lives to be involved in mission among the nations of the world. With the advent of a more robust congregational movement, however, this has extended into at least one Messianic Jewish mission agency. Keren HaShlichut is an Israeli mission agency with indigenous leadership, which sends Israeli Jewish believers out to the nations (see Gefen 2004 on the recent history of this movement). It is certainly hoped that this kind of trend will continue, and that people from all segments of the Messianic Jewish world will become more involved in mission to the nations. In this, Messianic Judaism is coming full circle. Even as a genuinely indigenous

⁶ The papers presented at this 2007 conclave, the “Borough Park Symposium,” can be downloaded or viewed online at <http://www.boroughparksymposium.com>

movement to and in Jesus the Messiah has continued to grow, members of this movement will begin moving out, bearing witness to the presence of the Messiah in their midst, partnering with him in the initiation of indigenous movements to faith in this same Messiah among those who still have not heard.

References

Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. 2000. *Messianic Judaism*. London: Cassell.

Endelman, Todd M. 1999. *The Jews of Georgian England: 1714-1830*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Frey, Joseph Samuel C. F. 1841. *Judah and Israel* (Fourth Edition). New York: D. Fanshaw.

Fructenbaum, Arnold G. 1974. *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy*. Washington, D. C.: Canon Press.

Gefen, Gavriel. 2004. Restoring Mission from Israel to the Nations. *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21, No. 3 (Fall): 103-109.

. 2008. Re-Contextualization: Restoring the Biblical Message to a Jewish-Israeli Context. *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 25, No. 2 (Summer): 99-108.

Gidney, W. T. 1908. *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, 1809-1908*. London: London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews.

Glaser, Mitchell L. 1998. Jewish Missions in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, 1900-1950. Paper Presented to LCJE North America, March 2-4.

Heman, Karl Friedrich. 1903. Missionen unter den Juden. In *Realencyklopädie für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. 13. Ed. Albert Hauck, 171-192. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs.

. 1910. Missions to the Jews. In *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 6. Ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, 177-181. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company.

Jackson, S. H. 1824. *The Jew: Being a Defense of Judaism Against All Adversaries, Particularly Against the Insidious Attacks of Israel's Advocate*. New York: Johnstone & Van Norden.

Jocz, Jakób. 1962. *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ*. London: SPCK.

Kinzer, Mark S. 2005. *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with Jewish People*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.

- Kjær-Hansen, Kai. 1995. *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Meyer, Louis. 1983. *Louis Meyer's Eminent Hebrew Christians of the Nineteenth Century: Brief Biographical Sketches*. Ed. David A. Rausch. New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Minutes of the First Hebrew-Christian Conference of the United States. 1903. Pittsburgh: Maurice Ruben.
- Perlman, Susan. 2000. Missiological Issues in the Encounter with Emerging Judaism. *Missiology* XXVIII:1 (January): 65-82.
- Ruppen, Arthur. 1913. *The Jews of To-day*. Tr. Margery Bentwich. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Schonfield, Hugh J. 1936. *The History of Jewish Christianity*. London: Duckworth.
- Shpall, Leo. 1950. Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States. *Agricultural History* 24, No. 3 (July): 120-146.
- Sobel, B. Z. 1974. *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Spielberg, Faña and Stuart Dauermann. 1997. Contextualization: Witness and Reflection. Messianic Jews as a Case. *Missiology* XXV:1 (January): 15-35.
- Thompson, A. E. 1902. *A Century of Jewish Missions*. Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company.
- World Missionary Conference. 1910. *Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World*. Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier.